Avoiding Grey Hairs: Exploring Effective Classroom Management Strategies for English Discussion Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Using notes kept as part of a teaching journal, this short paper looks at a significantly and exceptionally "troublesome" English discussion class – one that was markedly different from the instructor's other classes. After highlighting the connection between classroom management, discipline and teacher stress, the paper outlines the major issues that arose in the class and the impact they had on both the instructor and students over the course of a semester. Then, considering ideas of group cohesion, individual stresses, motivation and different learning techniques, the paper examines possible reasons for the problems, which were largely behavioural. The instructor's responses and attempted remedial actions, and the results thereof, are detailed. Potential solutions are then explored, taking various classroom management and discipline strategies into account.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching journals are useful in many ways. Firstly, they provide a means by which educators can reflect personally on their teaching practices (Farrell, 2007); critical reflection generally being regarded as an important part of teacher development (Richards and Ho, 1998). Secondly, journal observations can be shared with colleagues, as in the case of this paper, which facilitates cooperative problem-solving. Journals can help educators to become critical learners themselves – students of their own classrooms.

With this in mind, I kept a teaching journal for a period of six weeks, writing my entries the morning of the workday following the lesson with the chosen class. I adopted an almost-stream-of-consciousness approach (Farrell, 2007), guided by several of the questions suggested by Richards and Ho (1998) Did anything unusual occur in the lesson? Where there any problems? What kind of interaction occurred? What grouping arrangements were used? Was anything done differently from usual? And, crucially, what are the instructor's current limitations?

Over the first four weeks of the English discussion course, it became apparent that one class was very different from the other 12 classes that I was teaching. Disrespectful, both towards me and each other, restless, inattentive, disruptive, overly-reliant on L1 and decidedly unpunctual, yet paradoxically capable of meeting the class grading criteria successfully, they were an unusually problematic and stressful class to teach. By the fifth week, I was confused as to what was causing these issues, unsure of how to resolve them, and growing increasingly frazzled. I noted, with guilt, that I was dreading having to teach the class each week. While one class in a previous semester had been similarly challenging, such classes seem to be exceptions. The majority of my classes are relatively pleasant and painless to teach. So what could make one class so different from the others? To consider this issue more deeply, as well as to try and devise strategies to lower my teacher stress levels, I decided to keep my teaching journal on the "problem" class.

Teaching has been ranked as one of the most stressful professions – second only to the job of driving an ambulance (www.teachers.org.uk), with classroom management cited as one of the leading reasons for job burnout of new teachers (www.apa.org). It is therefore relevant to consider what classroom management is, and how its potential for stress can be reduced.

Classroom "management", as opposed to classroom "discipline", can be defined as the creation of a positive, respectful learning environment in which students behave appropriately out of a sense of personal responsibility. Classroom discipline can be defined as ways of responding to inappropriate behaviour (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran, 2004). Classroom discipline too is "a well-documented source of teacher stress" - a "chronic stressor" in fact, with teachers reporting "minor (but repetitive) distracting and disturbing behaviours" as the source of this discipline-related stress (Lewis, 1999). Such misbehaviours have of course "plagued" teachers since "the days of the first academy started by Plato in Athens" (Wadden and McGovern, 1991). Classroom misbehaviour, incorporating all passive and active behaviours - for example, sleeping in class or talking disruptively - which detract from classroom learning, has collectively been termed "negative class participation" (Wadden and McGovern, 1991), a term which I will borrow for use in this paper. While some negative class participation can be said to occur in all language classes, Wadden and McGovern emphasise that its cause should always be considered, especially if it is more prevalent in a particular class (1991). It is also important to consider different classroom management and discipline strategies to reduce the teacher's stress in such situations.

DISCUSSION

In the fifth lesson of the course, as was by now the pattern, the students did not respond to my greetings after the chime had signalled the start of class. They continued to chat in L1 as I repeated myself, to little avail. They used L1 frequently throughout the lesson, not to negotiate meaning, but simply to make humorous comments and reactions. When I asked them, firmly, to only use L2, they simply laughed and made disrespectful comments in L1, probably assuming that I could not understand what they were saying.

The content of their L2 speech was abysmal and comprised almost entirely of illogical short utterances. They often misinterpreted the discussion preparation topics, despite repeated explanation from me. One of the popular students – T, used his cell phone in front of me, in spite of repeated reprimands in previous classes. Three of the nine students were absent, and one arrived at the beginning of the discussion test. Latecoming was a persistent issue in the class. Wadden and McGovern note that in oral-skills classes, tardy students not only interrupt the class, but hold the lesson back (1991).

In the sixth lesson, something strange happened. The students were, for the first time, cooperative and pleasant from the beginning of class, even scolding each other if someone was not paying attention or was using L1. The content of their L2 speech was of a much higher level, with longer utterances, and they completed two lively discussions, on which I complimented them.

While relieved at this about-face, I was confused – what had triggered the change? The only thing I had done differently was pairing myself with T during the warm-up activity to prevent him using L1, as he seemed to have an influence on the other students. Aldrich (2013) writes about perceived social pressure in the language classroom – whereby students are influenced by peer pressure to perform, or not perform, a behaviour – in this case, using L1. It is possible that this was happening in my class.

I also suspect that the students' discussion test results, which they had been able to check online before the sixth lesson, were what had caused the dramatic behavioural change. Despite their unruliness in Lesson 5, they had performed sufficiently well in the test to get A and B scores. After the test, I had also given very positive, encouraging feedback. Perhaps a combination of the praise and good results had assuaged some anxiety they may have had about L2. Aoki (2013) notes that students tend to become anxious when they feel they are not

proficient in the target language – and it can be presumed that this would negatively affect their behaviour. I decided to give more praise, where due, as a classroom management strategy.

In the seventh lesson, for no apparent reason, the students reverted to their usual pattern of negative behaviour. Two students were reticent (this too, was becoming a pattern), several were late, and none of them seemed to enjoy the lesson topic (they said this explicitly in L1). I also noticed that several students jokingly said, as they had before, that they still did not know everyone's name – though it seemed that they sometimes deliberately "mistook" each other's names, to try and give an aloof, disinterested image. In the lessons, some students also sometimes insulted each other in L1. The class dynamic left much to be desired.

In an attempt to engage the class in this "boring" seventh lesson, I spontaneously gave them an original question to talk about as a transition between activities. They seemed to enjoy this topic more, and revived somewhat – indicating that lack of interest and thus motivation could be influencing their behaviour. When they were not listening or were using L1, though seething inside, I tried to use a different approach to discipline, using a warning smile or stern look instead of saying anything. Wadden and McGovern (1991) suggest that when a teacher has to use a verbal reprimand, they have already allowed the students' behaviour to get out of hand, and recommend "a good stare or moment of silence" as an effective and energy-saving technique. I found it to be somewhat effective.

Lesson 8 was a disaster, due partly, it seemed, to a lack of preparation by the students – they had not done the required homework reading (a common occurrence, and something they admitted to freely in L1), and partly to bad grouping by me. I carelessly paired students with lower L2 ability, and low attention spans, together – a recipe for disaster in this class.

In Lesson 9, some students were still saying that they did not know each other's names – despite, it should be noted, the continued use of name cards since the beginning of the semester. Several students were late – one so late that she could not take the discussion test. They used L1 liberally throughout the test preparation activities, triggering me to snap and raise my voice, which drew sullen looks for a few seconds, before they returned to chatting in L1. While I thought that perhaps this unruliness was once again related to test nerves, unfortunately the pattern of misbehaviour continued up until (and in) the final lesson. A colleague who covered one lesson for me noted that the students' negative behaviour was exactly the same when he taught them – indicating that the problems were likely stemming from this specific group, or perhaps combination, of students themselves. This was reinforced by my personal observation that none of my other classes exhibited the same level of misbehaviour and lack of respect.

I can only speculate what might have caused the issues described above. Lack of interest, lack of motivation, low or perceived low L2 ability, possible learning challenges (in the case, I suspected, of T) and just plain bad attitudes could all have been factors. The L2 ability of the students was admittedly on the lower end of the university's ranking scale, which became particularly apparent during the final lessons, which dealt with advanced, difficult topics. In addition, I became aware that several of the students had entered the university on sports scholarships, so it is likely their interests and aspirations lay elsewhere. English discussion classes are mandatory – and it has been found that discipline problems often result when students feel they are not in the classroom by choice (Wadden and McGovern, 1991). It should also be noted that the early timeslot of the class was not exactly conducive to energetic and enthusiastic students.

Speculating that the behaviour of certain students may be influenced by learning challenges is highly controversial, but in the case of T, I repeatedly suspected such a thing. As Root (1994) notes, learning challenges are often not recognised, or not dealt with, leading many language teachers to speculate in silence whether such a factor might be at work in the case of

some students. While further observations and speculation is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth keeping two things in mind: firstly, that not all students learn the same way (Root, 1994); and secondly, with all students, no matter how they learn or what hidden challenges they may have, it is necessary for instructors to focus on their individual strengths (Root, 1994).

CONCLUSION

When considering possible solutions to the classroom management and discipline issues described above, finding and focusing on the individual strengths of the students seems to be most important. While it may be difficult for instructors to remain positive in stressful classroom situations, looking for and praising what psychologist Robert Brooks calls each student's "island of competence" (www.miusa.org) is a helpful technique, and one that I would do well to use more. For example, if a student struggles to share ideas in a discussion but asks good follow-up questions, examples of their questions could be noted and praised as part of teacher-fronted feedback (while also encouraging them to try to share even short ideas).

The above technique can be incorporated into the classroom management strategy (and contingency plan), which should be defined clearly from the outset. Shifting from an ineffective non-assertive classroom management style to a more assertive Canter-influenced style (Charles and Senter, 2005), I intend to take the following "strategic" actions based on the premise that all students can choose to behave well.

Firstly, with the use of posters or hand-outs, in the first lesson of each semester, I will make crystal clear my expectations for behaviour in the discussion class. I will then strictly and consistently reinforce these expectations throughout the course. I have always set out basic rules in my classes, but they may have been vague or difficult to understand. I also did not enforce them consistently – for example, occasionally letting use of L1 or rudeness "slide".

Secondly, following the advice of an experienced supervisor as well as the suggestions of Root (1994), I will write the agenda for each lesson on the board; offer clear transitions between activities; experiment with the assigning of roles to students; and give praise liberally (where due), building on the students' "islands of competence". This should help to create a better structured and more positive learning environment.

Thirdly, I will try to improve group cohesion among the students by adding more "get-to-know-you" activities to the beginning three lessons, and encouraging the students to have lunch or tea together as a group (teacher excluded) outside of class time. My observations from other classes, where students did just that, indicate that students who lunch together, work together. Aoki (2013) mentions the positive impact of class cohesiveness on learning motivation, and Truxal (2013) has observed that even classes of students who simply use each other's names frequently tend to get along better.

Although I did experiment with the above ideas in the class discussed in this paper, all of my actions were attempts to solve the issues retroactively. It is not surprising that I was unsuccessful. It is my hope that the strategies will prove effective by implementing them systematically and consistently from the beginning of each semester, thereby minimising the risk of future "problem" classes developing, and reducing stress related to classroom management and discipline issues. In addition, it might be beneficial to encourage the inclusion of stress management training in the university's instructor development programmes.

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